

Sunday, April 24, 2005

Home Page
Essentials
CyberSurveys
Forums
Photo Galleries
Weather
Horoscope
Lottery
Giveaways
Crossword
Advanced Search
Contact Us
Autos
Autos Insider
Drive
-- New Car
Photos
-- Car Reviews
-- Latest Deals
-- Model Reports
Joyrides
Business
Business
Money & Life
Careers
-- Find a Job
Real Estate
-- Find a Home
Metro
Metro/State
Wayne
Oakland
Macomb
Livingston
Commuting
Obituaries
-- Death Notices
Schools
Special Reports
Editorials
Columnists
Detroit History
Nation/World
Nation/World
Politics/Gov
Census
Health
Religion
Technology
Sports
Sports Insider
Lions/NFL
Pistons/NBA
Red Wings/NHL
Tigers/MLB
Shock/WNBA
MSU
U-M
More Colleges
High Schools
Golf

[Previous Story](#)
[Next Story](#)
[Latest 5](#)
[Marketplace](#)

- Browse
- New & U
- Employ
- Homes c
- Shop Or

[Home Del](#)

- Start hom
- Renew su
- Customer

[Special F](#)

- Special I
- Sunday, Ap
- State fai
- teacher sex
- Part 2: A
- increase
- Transfer
- Warren mol
- 22 convi
- misconduct
- solicitation
- Looking
- sexual abu

[Sections](#)
[Sunday](#)
[Select inc](#)

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Who are the victims?

Females, particularly females of color, are overrepresented as targets in educator sexual misconduct in relation to their proportion of the population.

	Percentage of students who are targets of educator sexual misconduct		Percentage of all students in population sample	
	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
White	24.7%	26.8%	28.1%	30.5%
Black	10.1	15.2	9.2	10.6
Hispanic	5.1	10.6	5.2	7.2
American Indian	1.5	1.5	.5	.4
Asian	0	.5	1.6	1
No response	1.5	2.5	2.4	3.3
Total	42.9	57.1	47	53

Source: Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature, prepared by Carol Shakeshaft for the U.S. Department of Education

The Detroit News

State fails to stop teacher sex abuse

Poor background checks and lack of communication let crimes go unchecked.

By Marisa Schultz / The Detroit News

Students at Warren's McKinley Elementary School didn't think much of the black gym bag their teacher carried -- until federal agents discovered its mesh pocket concealed a video camera.

The kids who had trusted Aaron Brevik, 33, soon learned he secretly filmed boys in locker rooms, showers and the bathroom. One horrified parent identified her son by his boxers. Brevik molested the child while he slept and recorded it.

Brevik, sentenced in March to 5-20 years in prison, is

What The Detroit News found

- Thousands of state teachers never had criminal background checks until recently.
- Communication lapses between prosecutors, courts and the state mean some teachers convicted of sexual misconduct remain certified.
- State officials sometimes learn about convicted educators through the media.
- The criminal background database the state is now relying on covers only Michigan and has gaps.

Coming Monday

What schools and lawmakers can do to set boundaries and better track abusive educators.

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 -- Movie Finder
 -- TV Listings
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 -- Restaurants
 -- Wine Report
 Books
 CD Reviews
 Escapes
 Casino Guide
 Michigan's Best
 Living
 Lifestyle
 Homestyle
 Fitness
 Forums
 News Talk
 Faith Talk
 Autos Talk
 Wings Talk
 Lions Talk
 Pistons Talk
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 Big 10 Talk
 High Schools
 Movie Talk
 Tech Talk
 Weblogs
 Photo Blog
 Politics Blog
 Pistons Blog
 Tigers Blog
 NFL Blog
 Rant/Rave
 RSS
 RSS Feeds

among at least 35 Michigan school employees or those recently employed by schools charged or convicted of sexual misconduct in the last 15 months. The incidents -- largely involving teachers -- have victimized nearly 50 minors and shaken communities such as Warren, Southgate and Pontiac, which have had more than one case each.

"You hope that things like this never happen again to your kids or to anybody else's," said a Warren mother, whose daughter was molested by a different teacher. "It makes you wonder who's out here watching what is going on."

The News is not naming several parents in this article to protect their children's identities.

While the Michigan Department of Education maintains it aggressively goes after abusive teachers, a Detroit News investigation finds that inadequate tracking of teachers, incomplete criminal background checks and poor communication among schools, courts and law enforcement agencies have allowed potentially abusive teachers to slip through the cracks.

Among The News' findings:

- Thirty-nine percent of 641 teachers whose licenses have been reviewed for revocation since 1986 were accused of sexual misconduct -- more than any other crime. Incidents included child molestation, possessing child pornography and sex with students.

- The Department of Education never revoked the certification of some of these teachers, as required by law. It

CyberSurvey

Talking about it

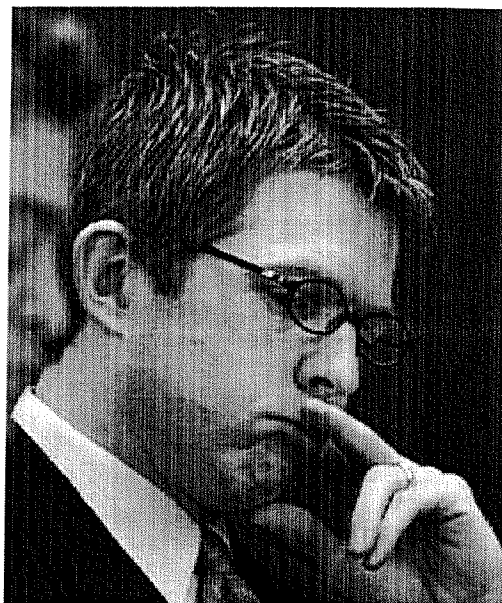
Have you found it easy to talk to your children about potential sexual abuse? Tell us why.

☐ Yes

☐ No

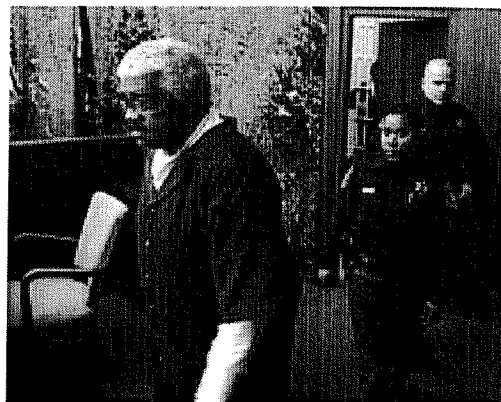
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David Coates / The Detroit News

Former Principal Clark Sexton faces trial in July for initiating sex with a student. He says the relations began after she turned 16; the girl says their relationship began when she was 15.



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

Courtrooms reflect the divisions teacher abuse can cause. When Southgate Anderson High School teacher Joseph Brickey was sentenced, supporters filled benches

says it never heard of these convictions from local prosecutors.

- Until procedures were changed in December, employees hired before the

1993-94 school year had never been checked for a criminal history. The police database the Department of Education relies on is only as good as the information law enforcement agencies and courts provide. Five school employees recently convicted still show clean histories in the database.

- The state only learns of teachers fired for sexual misconduct if a teacher appeals the firing. Since 1982, the state has allowed nearly a dozen teachers to keep their certification even though the state tenure commission upheld their firings for sexual misconduct. At least one is still teaching.

- State law requires FBI and state criminal background checks on new teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, nurses, social workers, school psychologists and bus drivers. However, special education paraprofessionals, janitors, cafeteria workers, coaches and others in contact with children are not covered.

- Prosecutors and courts are required to report all felony and certain misdemeanor convictions to state education officials so they can rule on decertification. But when charges are reduced in plea bargains, no duty is placed on prosecutors and courts to report convictions not covered by the law.

Such a deal allowed Ann Arbor's Worlee Dennis Jr., 45, to keep his right to teach even after he was convicted in two cases involving sexual misconduct.

In the first case, Dennis, who was teaching at Mitchell Elementary School at the time, was charged with one count of second-degree criminal sexual conduct involving a fourth-grade student. Under a deal, he pleaded guilty to assault in 2002.

Washtenaw County Prosecutor Brian Mackie said his office didn't alert the state of Dennis' conviction to protect the teacher's right to confidentiality.

In 2004, Dennis, working as a car salesman by then, was arrested again in Wayne County for trying to solicit sex with a person he thought was a 13-year-old girl online. He was convicted of one count of using a computer to commit a crime and sentenced to 2 1/2 to 20 years in prison in October.

The Wayne County Prosecutor's Office declined to comment on whether it notified the state of his second conviction.

Dennis still holds his certification.

"You think school is a safe place for kids; especially at that particular age they look up to the teachers as a good person," said the father of the Mitchell Elementary victim. "And then to have something like this happen."

Tracking system failures

A state auditor general report released in 2004 concluded the Department of Education needs to do a better job of tracking criminal

on one side, while a smaller crowd sat behind the teen victim.

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convictions, documenting current teachers and updating the records of teachers who have been decertified.

The audit found that 222 licensed school workers, mostly teachers, had criminal records; and that the state did not know about 178 of them. Five employees had convictions for robbery, assault and criminal sexual conduct; others had been arrested for shoplifting or alcohol-related offenses.

"I think the auditor general report made us aware that the system that we had been relying on had not been working," said interim state superintendent of education Jeremy Hughes. "Frankly, we had been convinced up to that point that the system had been working, and the audit general report showed ... that still some people were slipping through."

The department says it will address the certification of teachers such as Dennis.

Asked about teachers keeping their certification despite their firing being upheld by the tenure commission, Hughes said that under current law the state can't revoke a tenured teacher's certification unless the teacher has been convicted. He said he would support examining a change in the law. "I am concerned," he said.

As part of its response to the audit, the department announced in December it will now check the criminal histories of all teachers twice a year through the Michigan State Police. The background checks will only cover Michigan, however.

Among other findings in The News' investigation, the Department of Education didn't compile a master list of 950 teachers convicted largely of felonies until last year when the Legislature ordered it to do so. A third of those records were missing details such as where a teacher taught and the dates of crimes. The department employee charged with keeping the files since 1998 says she keeps copious records but can't speak for her predecessor.

Until 1996, school districts weren't required to request or share personnel records with other districts. So a school employee fired for sexual misconduct from one district could conceivably go work in another without his or her history being disclosed, a practice called "passing the trash."

Abuse reports increase

Nationwide, reports of educator abuse are increasing, but it's unclear whether the abuse is more prevalent or whether kids are more willing to come forward. A crackdown on Internet predators, more conversations between parents and kids about abuse and the exposure of sexual misconduct in the Catholic Church may be prompting more victims to report the abuse, experts say. A report released last summer by the U.S. Department of Education estimates that one in 10 children will encounter sexual misconduct from a school employee.

"People who are going to sexually abuse kids are going to go where the kids are," said Charol Shakeshaft, author of the report and a professor in the Department of Foundations, Leadership and Policy Studies at Hofstra University in New York.

The report, mandated by Congress, was criticized by the Department of

Education as well as teachers' unions for lumping physical and verbal abuse together. Nevertheless, the Department of Education concluded both are of "grave concern."

The report found that males are more often the culprits than females. Nonetheless, a few high-profile cases in Michigan and the nation have highlighted women as abusers. Five of the 35 Michigan educators arrested or convicted of sex crimes are women.

Margaret Trimer-Hartley, director of communications for the Michigan Education Association, a union that represents teachers, says sexual misconduct involves only a fraction of Michigan's more than 100,000 teachers.

The union takes sex crime convictions very seriously and believes schools need to train employees to recognize warning signs of abuse, she said.

"With the magnitude and the number of false accusations that are made out there, we have to protect those that are falsely accused," Trimer-Hartley said. "And a lot of the times people don't understand that we are not out there defending sex offenders. We defend their right to go through the legal process and make sure they are innocent until proof positive."

She points to a case near Lansing, where a Leslie High School special education teacher was charged last year with sexual abuse. Prosecutors dropped the charges after police determined the student who accused him was lying. She was convicted of filing a false police report. The teacher later died of a heart attack.

Disabled students at risk

Some cases of abuse are so egregious they shock even seasoned police officers. Such was the case of Terry Neff, a former special education paraprofessional sentenced this month to 30-60 years in prison for raping one of his students. Neff, who had met the student when he worked in the Traverse Bay Area Intermediate School District, had a felony drug conviction in Indiana for which he served prison time, according to police.

Since paraprofessionals are not required to undergo background checks, his conviction never surfaced.

"I've been in law enforcement for 10 years now, and this single case bothered me more than any other case because of the trust issue and the fact that she had an 18-month-old's capacity," said Detective Abe DeVol of the Kalkaska County Sheriff's Department. "To look at her and see her abilities -- it really makes you sick."

The girl's father, Yves Champt, who is allowing The News to use his name, said he had trusted no one to care for his daughter until he met Neff at her school. He and his wife left their 19-year-old daughter in his care so they could enjoy a summer afternoon together. Before they left, Champt got a call that will forever haunt him.

"Your daughter has been raped," a Department of Natural Resources officer told him.

Neff, 53, had assaulted his daughter in the woods before DNR officers found them.

"The mission was to sexually molest children, not just any children ... but the ones that are helpless, the ones that cannot speak or defend

themselves," said Champt, 49.

Now Champt is lobbying for the state to require nationwide criminal background checks for paraprofessionals.

Shakeshaft's report notes that disabled students are more likely to be sexually abused than students without disabilities.

To curb educator sexual abuse, Shakeshaft says leaders need to track the problem.

"We know the number of reindeer in Alaska," Shakeshaft said. "Why don't we know the number of children who are sexually exploited by trusted adults? ... It is shameful."

Dividing communities

The recent cases of educator sexual abuse have rattled some local communities. Some cases have divided courtrooms.

When Southgate Anderson High School teacher Joseph Brickey was sentenced in February to 17 1/2 to 40 years in prison, at least 34 teachers and students wrote letters to the judge saying Brickey was well-respected and had to be innocent.

In court, his supporters sat to the right, filling all the benches. To the left, the 17-year-old victim bobbed her legs nervously. She and her supporters, a smaller crowd, had waited months for this day in Washtenaw Circuit Court, where Brickey was sentenced for having sex with her in a Red Roof Inn in Ann Arbor five times in 2003.

"You were supposed to lead by example," the former student told Brickey. "But you are nothing but a lying coward."

Brickey, serving time in Lapeer County, is filing an appeal. "I am an honorable man. ... It did not happen," he said in court.

Oftentimes, teacher sex abuse cases never make it to the courtroom. Cases are pleaded down because kids fear testifying or they may never come forward to avoid "tattling."

"Generally, parents don't like to have their kids testify and the whole school knowing about it," said Macomb County Prosecutor Eric Smith, the former chief of the office's sex crime unit. "And the rest of the teachers rally around whoever is accused. Generally, the teacher is a well-liked teacher, and the charge seems so out of character for whoever is accused. There is no advantage for these kids to come forward. ... As soon as they come forward, their life is turned upside down."

Then there is the individual susceptibility of the students.

Clark Sexton, former principal of Agape Christian Academy in Canton Township, is scheduled to go on trial in July for initiating a sexual relationship with a female student.

The girl says he told her he loved her. And at 15, her first love held a lot of sway.

"You know what, sadly, I fell for it," the girl, now 20, said of the married Sexton's pledge that he wished he could have married her. "And I wish I wouldn't have, because it was all lies."

Sexton maintains he didn't have sexual relations with the student before she was 16 -- the legal age of consent in Michigan. The law was changed recently to make sex with a student of any age a crime.

"He's not denying there was contact after 16," said Sexton's defense attorney, Paul Clark.

Teachers stay certified

The Detroit News found several teachers convicted of crimes against minors who never had their certification revoked. They include Steven Dollaway, 46, who pleaded guilty in Oakland County in 2002 to assault and battery in exchange for six criminal sexual conduct charges involving minors being dropped; Matthew Mankoff, 29, a former Deckerville Community Schools band teacher, who was sentenced in 2003 to 1-5 years in prison for trying to meet an undercover officer, posing as a minor on the Internet, for sex; and William Ayler, 51, a former Detroit Public Schools teacher who pleaded guilty in 1997 to one count of second-degree criminal sexual conduct.

The Department of Education blames prosecutors for not alerting it of the convictions, as required by law. Oakland County Prosecutor David Gorcyca said his office alerted Detroit Public Schools about Ayler's arrest, but not of the conviction.

"We are a little bit at fault in some fashion," Gorcyca said, "although they were placed on notice of the charges and the fact it was awaiting charges in circuit court."

Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Maria Miller declined to comment on whether the department notified the state of Mankoff's conviction. Mankoff's certification recently expired, said the Department of Education.

"It's been our routine practice to send a letter to notify the school where the person is employed when the case is bound over," Miller said. "And then we notify the state upon conviction. We are going to modify the procedure now that we have discovered this problem to make sure we get a written verification or confirmation that the notification has been received."

In the Dollaway case, the former gym teacher at Commerce Elementary School in the Walled Lake Consolidated School District was charged with six counts of second-degree criminal sexual conduct and three counts of assault and battery amid allegations he touched female students' breasts and buttocks during class and snapped their bra straps, according to Oakland County Chief Deputy Prosecutor Deborah Carley.

The case was difficult to prove, as the touching took place in a gymnastics class, she said.

The charges were downgraded and, as part of the deal, Dollaway swore under oath he would give up his teaching certificate, Carley said.

State officials were never notified of the plea deal. Dollaway still has a teaching certificate, according to state records.

Without the Department of Education knowing of such deals, a teacher could get a duplicate copy of the certificate with ease, department officials said.

► This story continues.

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